

Bronze Age Burials at Brackenber Moor, Appleby-in-Westmorland

At the November meeting of the Appleby Archaeology Group, members were fortunate to hear the results of the latest research by PhD student Sam Walsh, on Bronze Age human remains and burial sites in the North West, including recently discovered material from Brackenber Moor near Appleby-in-Westmorland.

Sam has been investigating Early Bronze Age (2,200-1,500 BC) burial practices for a PhD at the University of Central Lancashire. This has involved the analysis of cremated remains from museum collections in the North West and also the cremated human bone from the newly discovered site at Brackenber Moor. Human remains can tell us a lot about people in the past, not just the age, sex and height of individuals, but also information about their diet, diseases suffered, injuries sustained and, sometimes, the activities undertaken in life. Analysis of the remains can also provide a unique insight into prehistoric burial practices and beliefs.

In the Bronze Age there were two main burial types: inhumation; with bodies often laid in a crouched position in a stone cist or grave, and cremation. The cremated bones are often placed in pottery vessels or in pits. Cremation is often considered to have been a low-status form of burial, but actually involved a significant investment of time and resources, being a lengthy process, both in the creation and maintenance of a funerary pyre, and the subsequent burial of the cremated remains, which were often placed in funerary monuments, as at Brackenber Moor. Here several individuals were placed in pits within a circular bank and ditch, along with a collared urn and smaller accessory vessels, dated to 1,900-1,700 BC. Five individuals, four adults and a child have been identified at Brackenber Moor

The most complete Bronze Age cremation was of a middle-aged/older woman, who was buried with two small decorated pottery vessels. Analysis of the bone indicated that she had developed extra bone on her hands, and there were signs on her spine and jaw which suggested she had suffered from osteoarthritis. The breakage patterns on the bone, suggested she had been laid on her left side on the funerary pyre, after which the bone was collected and buried in a pit. Another adult female showed signs of stress on one side of her body, indicating a repetitive strain from a specific activity, possibly the scraping of hides or another activity.

Research on other Bronze Age cremation sites in the North West (e.g. Aglionby, Carlisle) has suggested that children were always buried with an adult or maybe a family member. This was presumably as a form of guardianship. However, the monument at Brackenber has provided a unique example of a child being buried alone in a pit with a collared urn. Does this mean the child had no ancestry at that location or was he/she being singled out in some way? The audience were intrigued by the questions this raised.

The group thanked Sam Walsh warmly for sharing her recent research, which has helped to highlight the human story of so many centuries ago. Further work is to take place at Brackenber Moor next year as part of the Altogether Archaeology Project organised by the North Pennines AONB Partnership, and is open to all interested individuals. Further details of the investigation will be circulated through the Appleby Archaeology Group and on our Facebook site. www.facebook.com/ApplebyArchaeology

The next talk will be on Tuesday December 11th in the Supper Room Market Hall Appleby when Alastair Robertson (Local Historian) will talk on Epiacum, the latest developments at Whitley Castle.